

EDITORIAL

First the acknowledgements: to Sue Ambrose for designing the cover, and to Tineke Treffers for the cartoons.

This is the first Newsletter since the misery of June 9. Cathie Marsh's article is thus a timely one. As socialists and statisticians, we are well placed to scotch any suggestion that Labour lost because of the opinion polls. As Cathie says, there are important questions to be answered about whether and how polls on specific subjects affect people's opinions, but Labour's lamentable performance was surely caused by more profound factors.

RS28 is, I think, a good issue because it both extends the debate in some areas (for example, on Censuses and on ethnic statistics) and starts new ones in others. And so I hope some of you will respond to Gavin Ross' article on decision theory and disarmament. Could this method help people to work out what they think about nuclear weapons? Another pleasing aspect of this Newsletter is that the issues that are raised and discussed - polls, Censuses, government statistics, decision theory, Poisson models - are central to the work of so many statisticians.

Let me end on a more personal note. The beginning of Radical Statistics can reasonably be traced to the letter which appeared in RSS News and Notes in January 1975. As one of the people who signed that letter, I have always felt just a little guilty at not having edited a Newsletter before. On the other hand, it is reassuring to know that 27 issues appeared before I had a chance to absolve myself. Of course, there is much more we could and should be doing, but the range of articles in this issue suggests that Radical Statistics still has a promising future.

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BOOK REVIEW

The War Atlas: armed conflict - armed peace. Michael Kidron and Dan Smith. Pan Books, 1983. Price £5.95.

As if all the problems, theoretical and technical, of selecting and presenting statistical data in a non-misleading way were not enough, radical statisticians have another problem, of communication: how to turn rows of figures into something that will appeal to, interest and convince the non-numerate majority who are supposed to bring about radical change?

The appeal of the War Atlas, as of its predecessor, the State of the World Atlas, is that it may do something to solve this problem, by translating those rows of figures into a blaze of colours, and complex situations into diagrams with arrows. In this it may succeed too well: you can look through the maps without worrying about the data on which they are based (data problems have been conveniently segregated in an appendix), and in fact you can omit any reading and just enjoy the colours. Now this may be a risk worth taking if the Atlas is making accessible to people important information which they would otherwise not receive. But if, as I suspect, the market for the Atlas consists overwhelmingly of those who are knowledgeable about, and sympathetic to its message, then it risks being merely aesthetic relaxation for the already converted.

But there are also more specific problems with the atlas format. One, which it shares with the rows of data on which it is based, is that the underlying assumptions, the way the data was produced, the social context are concealed. The notes at the end provide discussion of the data, as well as other comments on the maps, but this doesn't really solve the problem, which is to communicate to the reader not merely certain information, but a critical view of how information is produced and presented. As it is, the atlas as a whole conveys an exaggerated impression of the objectivity of at least some military statistics.

Maps also face specific difficulties stemming from the organisation of information on a territorial basis. This is effective in showing a gradual process such as the expansion of Israel (map 5), much less so in displaying a complex sequence of events (e.g. the invasion of Lebanon, also map 5). Map 6, which displays 'export of civil conflict to foreign territory' by showing incidence of bombings, kidnappings, etc., is impenetrable, and much less enlightening than a simple listing of such incidents. The attempt to force too much information into a territorial format leads to utter confusion in some cases. Thus maps 13-15, which attempt to show the various types of military hardware available to every country in the world, on maps of the world spread over two foolscap pages, really go over the top; the maps are solidly packed with symbols, often placed an ocean away from the country they refer to. It's quite impossible to assess the state of play in a particular part of the world and, again, a simple list would be far more revealing.

So, what information does the atlas convey? There is a general message which goes something like 'Wars take place in The South, using armaments produced in The North, which often also sends out armies to fight

proxy wars. Most of the profits accrue to The North, while The South suffers most of the deaths, economic devastation, etc. But eventually the whole process threatens to destroy North and South alike^o. This general message is conveyed over and over again in the atlas, and while the maps are quite revealing, you really only need a few to get the message across. But when it comes to more specific messages, the atlas format is often quite unhelpful: the relevant information can't be adequately summarised, and the significance of what the maps show can only be understood by one who already knows the situation.

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